



Rippling Effects: How Segregation in 1900s America Affects Life Today

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The essence of my work is probably what had gripped me most during the lectures in class and while reading the “The Warmth of Other Suns”. My interest had most likely stemmed from my previous curiosity about the outer Downtown area of Houston, which falls no short from the definition of a ghetto. The many run-down streets and dilapidated houses and businesses in the area makes one wonder about the structure of the city; why is it that the outer loop is so impoverished while the inner downtown area is relatively prosperous? This question would often arise while I made my daily commute to university.

The answer stems from a history that is unfortunately swept under the carpet in today’s modern society. The run-down nature of these ghettos is caused by the unequal distribution of wealth that spawned a chain of events that began long before the “era of equality” that we live in today.

In the events leading up to the Civil Rights Movement, the segregation line separating African Americans from white people was a strictly enforced yet often invisible line. Every point in American lifestyle, ranging from the importance of a regular job to a trivial drink from a water fountain, was judged and moderated by Jim Crow. The most deeply rooted facets of segregation, however, would ironically stem from the North, where the concept of African American freedom originally took root during the days of slavery. The separation of whites and blacks both in status and location was enforced in the minds of the people, rather than in the local government. Neighborhoods were heavily separated by a color and wealth line, most prominently seen in northern cities such as Chicago and New York City. One of the neighborhoods in New York City, known as Harlem, became a major hub for African Americans moving in from the South during the Great Migration. Although segregation was often not defined by law in these areas, they were

no less enforced by the will and acts of the people, who failed to see how their form of segregation was an issue.

A prominent example of the racism that ran rampant in the northern cities was in Cicero, a suburb within Chicago, Illinois. Before the migration of black citizens during the Great Migration era, Cicero was an entirely white community. In June 1951, however, the Clark family moved into an apartment complex in the area, despite the warnings and threats given by tenants and residents in the area. Immediately following their move-in many white residents and homeowners in the neighborhood revolted, sparking the Cicero Race Riot of 1951. Despite the lack of charges against the nearly 5,000 white rioters for property damage and violence, the Clark family managed to keep their rights to the household. The hatred did not stop at that point, unfortunately. Upon learning that the Clark family was allowed to stay in their homes, the residents of the neighborhood quickly emptied out and moved to other communities. They simply had no interest in living in a neighborhood that had been “tainted” by Negroes. Within a few years, Cicero transformed from an all-white, high class community to a widely-poor, black community.

The movement of the white families out of Cicero also had unintentional, but nevertheless negative side effects to the economic state of the suburb. With the disappearance of the white families inhabiting the community the money that they had, along with the tax money they provided, vanished. Naturally, the infrastructure of the community collapsed. The degradation of Cicero, as a result, could not be prevented, as the money foundation which the community was built upon collapsed. Tenants would often unsuccessfully attempt to draw in more white buyers with lower rental prices and homes, but to no avail. The white families in the

mid-1900s were simply against living side-by-side with African Americans. As the rental prices lowered, the economic flooring of many communities such as Cicero would disappear, as well.

It should be noted that this situation and the chain of events leading up to it does not mean that all black families are poor and all rich families are white; that would be an oversimplification of the economic disparity present in society that does not give justice or consideration of the other races on either side. However, the socioeconomic standards which affected the population and wealth distribution of society before and during the Civil Rights Movement should not be ignored.

As an accumulation of what I have learned, my art work, "A Vicious Circle," is designed to give a linear representation of the economic degradation that takes place as a result of this uneven distribution of wealth. I attempted to give the setting of the artwork a feeling of an everyday situation, while clearly displaying the dilemma that befalls modern society. Many of the subjects in the piece are direct symbols of the uneven economic standards that are present in 21st century communities.

The black family, looking upon the homes and the white families, is representative of the situation many black families faced during their migration into the northern cities. The family also displays the plight that many lower-class Americans suffer from today; there is not enough money in the area. Due to the economic situation that the neighborhoods exist in, not enough money is being gathered from taxes and the local government to encourage an improvement on the infrastructure of an area. Thus, it is a common sight to see many impoverished areas stay poor. This stagnation is not because of a lack of initiative from the community, but rather because money is always being sucked out of it due to the families that leave as soon as they can.

Inversely, the white family in the piece symbolizes the rich upper class that is moving away from the lower-class homes. Although the middle house is respectable in appearance, especially when compared to the dilapidated house on the left side, upper-class families tend to move away from these areas in favor of more modern households. As such, the areas where money circulation is needed most is doomed to never receive it. Furthermore, the white family seems disinterested in the black family, who are watching the white people move towards the modern household. The white family represents the ignorance of the upper-class's impact on the local economy when they leave their former homes and how this trend continues over and over, even to today.

This trend of separation between the poor black community and the rich white community comes about today not primarily because of racism, but because of socioeconomic standards that were defined many generations before. These boundaries simply appear because of the sad truth that the majority of the poor remain poor because of their environment. There is simply no potential for growth. To display the hopelessness present in such an environment, I used dark and somber colors on the left side to represent the stagnation present in poor communities. On the other side is the modern home, which is representative of the vicious circle that plagues cities. As the size of the poor and lower-class neighborhoods approach the richer neighborhoods, rich families feel the impulse to move further away, continuing the cycle over and over.

In conclusion, my art work is made to signify my opinions and knowledge about the state of poor communities and how they emerge. It is true that racism still exists in modern society, and events such as the recent election have brought hate groups back into the spotlight, supporting this notion. However, I believe that racism is not the driving point of segregation

between white and black families today. Instead, the segregation that is seen today comes as a result of different socioeconomic standards that have come about because of a past history of racism. Poverty today does not see color. The trend relating black people and ghettos is only coincidental, but it is unfortunately associated with ties to the past that are tough to break.

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